My Journey From Cairo

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Chapter One

The Door He Broke

One day, a kid from Sunday school decided to come and check on me.

My father had just landed after being overseas for more than a month. That was my bad luck. He had barely come back, barely put his feet inside the house, when the knock came at the door.

He opened it.

The kid said, "Hello, uncle. Is Ed there?"

My father said, "Yeah, who's asking? I think he's in the shower."

"My name is Magid. From Sunday school."

"Oh. Sunday school."

"Yes, because he hasn't been to Sunday school for like six Sundays now, so I just wanted to stop by and check on him."

My father kept his voice calm. Too calm.

"Oh, no, he's actually in the shower. Okay. I'll let him know. Thank you so much."

He let Magid go. The door closed. The house went quiet.

I was in the shower, maybe twelve or thirteen years old. Maybe even eleven. Memory does strange things with age, but it does not

blur the terror. I remember the sound before I remember the pain. The bathroom door breaking. The crash of it. My father coming through like something unleashed.

He grabbed me by my hair and yanked me out of the shower naked.

Then he started punching the crap out of me.

My father had been a boxer. His arm was like Arnold Schwarzenegger's arm multiplied by four. That is how it felt to a child's face. That is how it still feels in my bones when I remember it. His fist landed and landed, and the beating took a long time. It did not stop after one punch, or two, or ten. It kept going and going and going.

My mother jumped in the middle, trying to break it off. He pushed her away. She hit the wall. She broke her freaking head in the wall for me while I was getting beat up.

That was the first major one, the worst one, when it came to Sunday school and church. I cannot forget that night. I cannot get it out of my brain. I spent three months sitting on my bed. No school. No going anywhere. No nothing.

My left eye was bloody and blue, swollen out of my face like a tennis ball. I could not even freaking open it. It was all closed, blue and swollen, standing there on my face like another punishment. I almost lost that eye. It still affects me today.

All of that because I was following Jesus.

And I didn't give up on Him.

When I believe in something, I never give up on it.

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To understand why a father would do that to his own son, you have to understand Cairo. You have to understand Egypt. You have to understand that in the East, everything is different than the West.

In Egypt, you follow your father's religion whether you like it or not. That is how it works. Your father is Muslim, you are Muslim. You do not get to choose. You do not get to say, "No, thank you, I belong to Jesus." You can be beaten for that. You can be killed for that. You can be beheaded for that.

My father was Sunni Muslim.

My mother was Coptic Orthodox Christian. Not a convert. Not someone who switched or flipped or turned later in life. Coptic from Coptic. Her whole family was original Coptic Orthodox Christian, generation after generation. My mother's family had money. My father was super poor. That was another thing he wanted to jump in on, if you get the picture.

I was told multiple bullshit stories my whole life. Something never clicked. Something never made sense. I did not know the truth until I was fifty-one or fifty-two years old, by accident.

I found out I was a bastard child.

Not because my mother or father were not my biological parents. They were both my biological parents. I mean bastard in the old meaning: a child who came without the concept of marriage. I was conceived before marriage. There was a twin brother too, but that is another part of the story.

I did not know.

After I was conceived, they got married. I don't know when. Maybe when I was four, five, six, seven. I don't even know. All I know is they covered it with marriage, because in Egypt a woman cannot just walk around with a child and no married man. My mother's family did not want her to marry my father. They were Christians. He was Muslim. But after what happened, they had no choice. They had to go against everybody's will to make the picture look a little bit better.

I do not know the full story of how they met, or how they fell in love, or how the sex happened. I know it was in Egypt. I know he was in love with her. From my understanding, when he wanted to marry her and her family did not want him to marry her, he went and had sex with her, or raped her, or whatever the truth was. That is how both of us came. That is how I arrived into this nasty-ass world.

And nobody had the decency to tell me.

I lived with my mother. I went through all that shit with her. She knew. And still she never told me, "This is what happened. This is who you are. This is why your life feels broken before you even know the word broken."

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When I was young, I was very close to my mother. My father didn't give a shit about me. He was often gone anyway. He had an import and export trading company, and that kept his ass outside the country all the time.

That was my luck.

When he traveled, my mother took me toward Jesus.

She did not have to push hard. She taught me when I was still naive, when I did not know what the hell was happening around me. She taught me the Our Father in English and in Arabic. She taught me Bible stories. I memorized them. I learned things in Coptic too—the prayers, the language, the sound of the ancient church breathing through us. I learned the faith behind my father's back.

And I fell in love with Jesus.

My life was full of Jesus. The relationship became bigger than my relationship with my mother. She opened the door, yes, but once I saw Him, once I felt Him, I belonged to Him. I was beaten, punched, tortured for Jesus. And still I went back.

Every chance I got, I went to church.

If my father took his car and headed to the airport, I knew he would be gone for a week or something like that. Then I was all over the church. Sunday school. Mass. Soccer leagues with the churches in Cairo. I was killing it.

This started when I was around thirteen and kept going until I was twenty-one, when I finally left Egypt and ran for my life. By fifteen or sixteen, I knew how dangerous it was, but danger did not stop me. It only made the hiding sharper. It made every church door feel like a miracle and every footstep behind me feel like a threat.

By eighteen, I went to the Pope.

Not the Roman Catholic Pope. People in the West hear "Pope" and think only of Rome. But in Egypt, we had the Coptic Orthodox Pope. Pope Shenouda III was the Coptic Orthodox Pope then, the Middle Eastern Coptic Orthodox Pope. Today it is Pope Tawadros. There is also an Ethiopian Pope. There are Popes in the ancient churches of the East that most people outside do not even know how to imagine.

I went to Pope Shenouda at eighteen, and he made me a deacon.

That was super, super dangerous.

To be a deacon in the Coptic Orthodox Church while having a Muslim father at home—or traveling and coming back soon—was not a small thing. It was not a cute religious choice. It was a death sentence waiting for the right knock at the door.

But I loved the cathedral. It was huge, in Cairo, the place where the Pope sat. I would walk in front of that specific church like my soul knew where it belonged. Sometimes I went on Saturday night. Sometimes Sunday morning for Mass. I can still see it. These are not just stories to me. They are scenes in front of my head from thirty-five, forty-five, maybe fifty years ago. I am still looking at them.

One day, I walked out of that cathedral after Mass and saw something that froze me.

My best friend was hiding behind a car.

He lived near my grandmother's house, my father's mother's house. He was my best friend there. We used to hang out every single time I went. I went there all the time. And now there he was,

crouched behind a car with three other guys, trying not to let me see him as I came out of church.

I went around behind the car and caught him.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" I said. "Are you fucking following me? I thought you were my best friend."

It took an hour and a half to pull the words out of his mouth.

Finally he told me.

My father had paid them money to follow me and see if I went to church again. If I did, they were supposed to go back and tell him.

Then my father would know.

Then he could come back for me.

That was my life: Jesus in my heart, fear at my back, my father's religion stamped over me by law and blood, and my mother's faith hidden inside me like fire.